

WEST BENGAL

Drifting Towards Anarchy

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With the next assembly polls less than one year away, it is now accepted almost as an axiom that the Trinamul Congress is going to secure a majority and form the government. The existing Left Front Government, humiliated by the unexpected defeat at the Lok Sabha polls, has initiated reservation facilities even for Muslims, because the Left Front and its major partner the CPI (M) have come to realize that the Muslims of West Bengal can no longer be kept under their sway by projecting before them the illusion of security. Not more than two decades ago, the official leftists of West Bengal used to be terribly angry at the very suggestion of reservation for Muslims, and if anybody talked about it, they did not hesitate to brand him as 'communal'. Their pet argument was that they had done enough for Muslims by preventing any large-scale communal riot in this state, and that such reservation would have the effect of aggravating communal tension. It is also true that a large section of the Muslim population of this state, frightened by the growing spectacle of Hindutva, considered themselves happier under Left Front rule. Now Muslims here want not only security of life and property, but something more as well. Yet it does not seem likely that the announced reservation facilities will bring back the Muslims to the side of the Left Front.

During the period starting from the late eighties to the assembly polls of 2006, threat, intimidation, fear of reprisal etc played their supplementary parts in securing votes for the CPI (M), but growing discontent since then blunted the age of these weapons. Singur and Nandigram made it clear to the people that what the Buddha Bhattacharya government was going to implement was only the programme initiated in India by Manmohan Singh, a programme of what one distinguished economist has called 'predatory growth'. What needs to be stressed is that the CPI (M), out of senseless arrogance, violated all norms of democratic behaviour, as well as of economic rationality, in acquiring land from farmers. Popular resistance against this acquisition and the unabashed display of armed official as well as hooligan power with the purpose of crushing this resistance only fuelled the blaze of anger. This anger spread throughout West Bengal, giving rise to spectacularly successful bandhs against which the CPI (M)'s rank and file felt helpless. The hypocritical flaunting of 'new sunrise in Nandigram' was dashed to the ground. To knowledgeable observers of the scene having some idea of history and applied economics it appeared that Buddhadeb Bhattacharya's talks of 'Industrialization' and 'development' only betrayed an ignorance of what these two things historically meant. Their opinions, when expressed in writing, exercised an influence on the masses, which, although not crucially important, was nevertheless useful in promoting the alienation of the CPI (M) from the educated middle classes.

It is a fact that the Trinamul Congress led by Mrs Mamata Banerjee considerably enhanced its strength by participating in the struggles of Singur and Nandi-gram. It was these two events that were decisive in shifting the balance of forces in the electoral battle. Objectively these struggles were directed against neo-liberal plunder, and at that time the CPI(M) came to be the principal political instrument of globaliza-tion and

liberalization in West Bengal. It may be recalled that in the wake of the ghastly massacre of 14 March 2007 in Nandigram, the Government led by Manmohan Singh explicitly came to assist the Left Front Government of West Bengal, which is why even Prakash Karat did not dare to withdraw support from the Singh Government after the infamous Hyde Pact. Karat, by withdrawing support in the wake of the nuclear deal, at last tried to save the fast dwindling leftist image of his party. But to his fellow travellers in West Bengal, having to lose to Mamata Banerjee in the electoral race after three decades of enjoyment of power is really heartbreaking. After the debacle in the Lok Sabha polls, the CPI(M) leaders of West Bengal began to blame Prakash Karat and his close associates for the setback in West Bengal. Their argument was simple: but for the withdrawal of support from the Manmohan Government the Congress and Trinamul Congress would have fought the elections separately, and the votes they could gather would have remained divided, and the CPI(M) and the Left Front would have retained their number of seats. Everybody knew that the Trinamul Congress was formed in the late nineties of the last century out of the Congress, and the electoral alliance between the two Congresses meant more or less an alliance between two rival factions of the Congress. The grudge of the West Bengal leaders is, hence, only an admission that they and their Front allies could not win the polls on their own. Mr Somnath Chatterjee, the expelled CPI (M) leader, expressed the same opinion when he poured the full vial of his scorn on Prakash Karat. Those who have a nodding acquaintance with the history of leftism in this country will, however, not hesitate to admit that what Karat did reflected a leftist attitude. The stunning defeat in the latest municipal polls, in which the Congress also fared very badly by contesting on its own, has shown that what Somnath Babu, Buddha Babu and their likes were suggesting were not only an expression of their bankruptcy, but was largely untrue as well. The CPI (M), already much demoralized after Singur and Nandigram, lost the bones and muscles to stand up to Mamata Banerjee with courage and conviction. This is the uncontestable fact. Right now, the CPI (M), while licking its election wounds, are speaking about the rectification of the style of functioning of its leaders as well as rank and file. But their leaders can no longer assert that they would return at the hustings. On the other hand, the Trinamul Congress is confident that they are going to come to power.

But one should analyze the defeat of the CPI (M) at the hands of the Trinamul Congress somewhat dispassionately. It is worthwhile to recall that the massive defeat of the Congress led by Indira Gandhi in the Lok Sabha polls of 1977 signified the popular anger against Emergency and authoritarianism of Indira Gandhi. The situation in West Bengal in 2009 was somewhat similar in the sense that Mamata Banerjee's victory, repeated in the last municipal polls, was more a response on the part of the electorate to the CPI (M)'s one party rule than a positive mandate in favour of the Trinamul leader. Keeping in mind the fact that Buddha Babu's slogan of 'development' has not carried conviction at all, it seems that these victories are possibly a reflection of what an economist well known for his continuous struggle against mainstream theoretical economics has written on the voting psychology of the Indian electorate :

'The poor are not manipulated easily by the grand illusory scheme of future prosperity created by the joint enterprise of politicians, big business, media and intelligentsia because life experience teaches them otherwise. Nevertheless they join a largely hollow democratic process, which promises no solution to their problems but might accentuate them if the wrong choices are made. They choose that political party which, at least for the time being, seems likely to inflict less damage by dispossessing them of their home, land, and livelihood in the name of development, or perpetrating communal violence in

the name of building a national culture. From the point of view of the ruling classes, developmental politics in the country has been reduced to a calculation of how to maximize for themselves the benefits of development irrespective of what happens to the poor majority. From the point of view of the poor classes too it is a calculation of how to minimize the damages caused to them in the name of development." (vide Amit Bhaduri: *The Face You Were Afraid to See*, pp. 7-8)

It is not that the electorate in West Bengal has much to expect from Mamata Banerjee and her party if and when they come to occupy the Writers' Buildings. Before the Lok Sabha polls, Mamata Banerjee incorporated some leftist agenda, such as the cancellation of the SEZ law, in her programme. But immediately after her successful election battle, she lost no time in joining Manmohan Singh's cabinet. Her party has also declared its intention to scrap workers' right to strike. This is an overture to corporate capital that she and her party are more reliable in the matter of implementing the neo-liberal programme. Thus even before coming to power she has begun the process of jettisoning what she propagated before the parliamentary polls. And as far as the author's own experience goes many of the Trinamul-led gram panchayets and municipalities have become citadels of corruption, and have been objects of popular hatred. If the Trinamul Congress wins the coming assembly polls it will be more due to the anti-CPI(M) wave, the angry reaction against the last two decades of accumulated malpractice than to any positive work. One silver lining is however there. The genuine leftist forces, although their strength is not cohesive, have got some space for mobilization and political work, a space that they could not hope to get when the CPI(M) imposed a virtually one party dictatorship in West Bengal. Much depends on how far these forces are able to expand and organize their fields of work in the coming days.

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